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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 001170

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DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

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SUBJECT: SENATOR SAKAKI OFFERS VIEWS ON YAR'ADUA, NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY, AND DELTA

REF: ABUJA 865

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Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for reasons 1.4. (b
& d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Poloff met with Kwara Senator Gbemisola Saraki-Fowora of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) June 6 to discuss her views on the April elections, the Yar'adua administration, and the events leading up to the inaugural session of the Nigerian National Assembly (NASS). Senator Saraki described President Yar'adua as a quiet and contemplative leader who supports an independent and accountable legislature. While she assessed the PDP leadership may fill the void left by the departure of Obasanjo's strong hand on legislative affairs, she assessed such independence would change the way the NASS did business. Saraki was seized with the Niger Delta crisis and reiterated her belief that military intervention was the only credible solution. END SUMMARY.

Senator Saraki Admits Elections Flawed

¶2. (C) Unlike her brother, Kwara State Governor Bukola Saraki (see REFTEL), Kwara State Senator Gbemisola Saraki-Fowora decried Nigeria's April elections as deeply flawed and noted the credibility of Nigerian elections had progressively deteriorated since 1999. (Comment: Senator Saraki openly opposed Obasanjo's third term agenda and as-such has less to lose from ruptures with PDP hardliners than does her brother, who may have future presidential aspirations.)

Yar'adua Respects Rule of Law

¶3. (C) Saraki described Nigerian President Umaru Yar'adua as introverted, contemplative, and apt to listen quietly to a cross-section of viewpoints, especially on the issue of the Niger Delta, without much comment. She assessed that Yar'adua was not hungry for power and observed he appears slow to make decisions, but "does what he says he will do"

when he announces a course of action. This led Saraki to believe Yar'adua would ardently pursue his widely publicized electoral reform agenda.

14. (C) Saraki predicted that Yar'adua would respect the rule of law, as shown by his forbearance towards the selection of NASS leadership. Obasanjo and his supporters were intimately involved in NASS leadership selection, but Yar'adua's hand was conspicuously absent from the process. While Yar'adua was not necessarily pleased with the PDP's NASS leadership choices or how they were made, he was clear both publicly and privately that he wanted NASS to be free to choose its own leadership without interference by the executive. Yar'adua also removed himself from the selection of government ministers by requiring each state to recommend three candidates. This system of selecting ministerial candidates led her to assess that former Abuja Federal Capital Territory Minister Nasir El-Rufai would not receive a ministerial nod from the new administration. (Comment: By requiring each state to nominate ministerial candidates, Yar'adua downplayed the importance of candidates' connections with the executive and enhanced the importance of their relationship with state governors.)

Concern Over Former State Governors

15. (C) Saraki was concerned with Yar'adua's apparently lax attitude towards former state governors and bemoaned that those indicted for corruption had not yet been prosecuted. That Yar'adua had not yet pushed the Electoral and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to advance cases against these governors, and that he allowed these governors to attend the NASS inauguration sends a dangerous message to corrupt officials that they would go untouched. She also noted many

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of these governors were allowed onto the NASS floor during its inauguration and may have been able to exploit new members' inability to find accommodations in Abuja by offering money or housing, therefore making new members beholden to them.

16. (SBU) Comment: EFCC Chairman Ribadu publicly announced outgoing governors indicted for corruption would be arrested on May 30th. While no governors have been arrested to date, the EFCC issued mandatory "invitations" in early June to no less than 15 governors suspected of corruption for interviews on their States' fiscal management under their administrations. End Comment.

Yar'adua's Forbearance Changes the Way NASS Does Business

17. (C) Saraki judged from Yar'adua's early interactions with NASS leadership that his laissez-faire attitude towards the NASS would change the nature of the relationship between the executive and the legislature and give the NASS the opportunity to re-invent itself as an independent institution. Yar'adua expressed surprise when the new NASS leadership arrived at the Presidential Villa for its traditional breakfast meeting and that Yar'adua failed to give political direction to Senators from his home state of Katsina during the inaugural session of the NASS. Saraki assessed it would now be the NASS's challenge to prove itself to Nigerians, who would evaluate the institution on its performance.

18. (C) Comment: During Obasanjo's Presidency, Obasanjo would meet with NASS leaders over breakfast to give legislative directives. Similarly, other NASS members would grant deference to Senators from the President's home state because they would use them to gauge the mood of the executive. Yar'adua's apparent disregard for these established power

relationships probably will change the way the NASS does business and limit officials' ability to take advantage of their patronage ties to the executive. End comment.

Obasanjo Looms in the Shadows of NASS Leadership Selection

¶9. (C) Saraki was quick to offer her insights into the election of Nigerian's National Assembly (NASS) leadership, observing that while selections held true to PDP's stated regional zoning objectives, they were disproportionately skewed to reflect PDP-loyalists who supported Former President Obasanjo's third term agenda. She also provided details of how the PDP's pre-selection of candidates caused a rebellion among party members over the choice of Benue State Senator David Mark as Senate President in the lead-up to the NASS inauguration (see septel). Saraki said Obasanjo had personally interviewed potential NASS leadership candidates in advance of the June 3 PDP caucus meeting, intimating that he disqualified any candidates who had opposed his third term. When Senators started backing Benue Senator and former governor George Akume for the Senate Presidency, Obasanjo took a heavy hand, calling PDP Senators to support Mark's candidacy or face political retribution. Despite the circumstances under which the NASS leadership was elected, Saraki believed David Mark would be a good Senate President because of his experience in the Senate.

¶10. (C) As an aside, Saraki opined Obasanjo was trying desperately to cling to power in the lead-up to the April elections, and told Poloff that rumors in March of Yar'adua's death in Germany had originated at the Presidential Villa.

¶11. (C) Comment: Saraki accepted a nomination for the Senate Presidency during the NASS's inaugural session on June 5, but withdrew her candidacy shortly thereafter. She did not appear bitter about not winning the Senate Presidency, but rather over Obasanjo's hand in candidate selection. The rift within the PDP in the lead-up to the NASS inauguration may have been tied to Obasanjo's amending of the PDP constitution, imposing himself as Chairman of the Party Board

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of Trustees and displacing former Chairman Tony Anenih. Anenih therefore may have been behind efforts prevent Mark, an Obasanjo loyalist, from winning the Senate Presidency in an attempt to remain relevant in the PDP. End Comment.

Interest Groups May Compete for Influence

¶12. (C) Saraki conceded that the Obasanjo-led PDP party mechanism probably would attempt to fill the power void in the NASS and direct the legislative agenda in lieu of the executive. She opined, however, that Yar'adua had a resilient power base and would be able to hold back any potential PDP advances because he had the loyalty of the new governors, who in her estimation actually controlled the country.

Saraki Reiterates Military Solution for the Delta

¶13. (C) Saraki was seized with the issue of resolving the Niger Delta crisis and advocated military intervention as its only credible solution. She conceded that the Nigerian military is ill equipped to tackle this problem, but believed civil society would be ineffective and described new Bayelsa State governor Timipreya Silva as antagonistic towards Delta militants. Saraki assessed that Abuja had the political will to dispatch the military to the Delta because the government was dominated by Northerners.

U.S.-Nigerian Legislature Exchange

¶14. (SBU) Since the majority of the NASS is comprised of first-term members, many of whom have little experience in the legislative process, Saraki suggested selected members of Nigeria's Senate would benefit from a visit to the United States Capitol to view Congressional operations and meet with Members of Congress. Poloff told Senator Saraki that he would pass on her suggestions.

Comment

¶15. (C) Energetic, candid, and well-spoken, Senator Gbemisola Saraki echoed her family's ardent support for President Yar'adua. Yar'adua's hands-off attitude towards the legislature, compared to Obasanjo's heavy-handed approach to governance, could bode well for efforts to establish independent and accountable democratic institutions in Nigeria. On the other hand, their lack of experience and the fact that many of them were handpicked by former President Obasanjo without regard to any public support they might attract could be a handicap. With no independent power base, the new National Assembly's ability to act without outside interference, from political godfathers and other interest groups, is in question.
CAMPBELL